

The Clipper Visits Alison Arnold

By MADDIE MERRIFIELD

Looking back over the years, Alison Arnold sees herself as having lived 4 different lives -- each one unique and filled with adventures and satisfaction.

Her "first" life was as the child of famous actor parents, a dream for so many young girls, but a reality for her as she traveled from city to city-and-experienced the life of theatre lights, costumes, makeup and music. She traveled from New York to San Francisco to Seattle as her father, George Alison, played the leading man opposite Helen Hayes, Ethel Barrymore and Lynne Fontanne in such Broadway hits as "Ben Hur," "Pollyanna" and "Babs." He became a "nationally known character actor and one of the most successful leading men in American theater," according to a New York Times obituary.

Her mother, whose stage name was Gertrude Rivers, would take Jessie (Alison Arnold's first name, which she later dropped, never having liked it) back stage to meet the actors and actresses and give her a taste for the theatre she would carry with her.

Along with the glamour of theatre life, however, came the difficulty of moving from hotel to hotel, getting settled, then picking up and traveling again. Her parents decided their daughter needed a place to call home and to be settled in one school. So Mrs. Arnold's "second" life began in Brookline, where she made her home with her grandparents.

Summers were the best part of those years growing up because Mrs. Arnold would join her parents at their Surplus St. home in Duxbury, which her parents bought in 1912 for \$3,000. She missed her parents during the school year, though she would join them at Christmas and Easter vacations wherever they were, and she eagerly awaited their summer reunions. Mrs. Arnold's mother would arrive with her trunk full of wonderful clothes and satin-covered candy boxes full of sweets for her daughter. One of her mother's fans, on learning about the young daughter, sent her a beautiful doll with a wondrous wardrobe, right down to the kid boots. There were always surprises in that trunk.

As summer would end, Mrs. Arnold remembers the awful feeling she would get, knowing her parents would be off to New York, while she returned to Brookline. "I can remember lying in bed, listening to the fall crickets and breathing the smell of my mother's perfume on one of her handkerchiefs, and feeling so sad. To this day I still hate August."

During the school months her father would write a poem on a postcard every week, and mail these "Jessiegrams" to "amuse and keep in touch with his little daughter during long, enforced absences."

homesickness took over. Her future husband was in Boston writing to her, she had spent 3 years on the stage, and her mind was made up. She returned East, married W. Richmond Arnold and settled down to a "wonderfully domestic life" in a house on Chestnut St. on Beacon Hill. They were prosperous, happy days. She stayed at home raising her son, John, and her daughter, Mary K., while her husband worked in his investment business. Then came the Depression. It was the beginning of Mrs. Arnold's "third" life.

"My husband's business suffered because of the Depression, and with my children in private schools, I wanted to keep them there. So I decided to get a job. I had always loved to write and had filled notebooks with stories and poems as a child. At that time I was a member of the Duxbury Yacht Club and the girl who covered news for the Boston Herald used to ask me who this one was and what so-and-so was doing." When she left for New York, she asked Mrs. Arnold to take over. Pauline Warren was society editor at the Herald then and she asked Mrs. Arnold to write about a weekend in Duxbury and send it to her. She got the job and in the fall was asked to cover theatre openings and art openings. Soon after, Warren was fired. "She had an awful temper." Mrs. Arnold was offered the job of society editor, and though she did not feel qualified ("I couldn't even type!"), the salary was too good to turn down. She was going to stay with the job until the Depression was over, but 34 years later, as the Herald was about to fold, Mrs. Arnold was still with them. "The society page was much more important in those days," said Mrs. Arnold. "Today it barely exists."

The job of society editor was not easy. Mrs. Arnold would attend an opera opening in the evening, rush back to the office and write her review before the 2 am deadline. Sometimes the copy boy would stand there holding out his hand, waiting for her to finish. Some Sunday papers would have 100 columns of weddings, "and I got to hate doing the weddings."

Through the years she has interviewed famous persons, such as the Henry Cabot Lodges, Mamie Eisenhower on her husband's Presidential campaign train, and Queen Elizabeth aboard her ship, Britannia, during the Bicentennial celebration. She remembers Prince Philip offering her a tray of various drinks, and acting surprised when she took the Orange Crush instead of a cocktail. "But the Queen was drinking Orange Crush, too, so I didn't feel funny."

One day at the office a young man named Cleveland Amory asked if he could look through Mrs. Arnold's extensive files. Thinking he needed information about one or 2 things, she agreed. "He spent most of the winter there and was always in my way." Later, when he had published his successful book, *The Proper Bostonians*, Mrs. Arnold recognized much of her material.

Mrs. Arnold had every intention of giving up her

Mrs. Arnold has a collection of them typed into a treasured little book. Examples:

LIGHTS

*The Western clouds are gold and red,
And soon the sun will hide his head.
The silver in the Eastern skies
Means that the moon is going to rise.
Just think how wisely it is planned
To have light always on the land.
When sun and moon both go to bed
The stars come out and shine instead.*

THE ROUND

*Summer is rosy-red
Autumn is golden brown;
In Winter, flowers are dead
And snow drifts down.
Then enter kindly Spring
With bud, bird, sun and rain
So every lost, loved thing
Comes back again.*

Mrs. Arnold graduated from Brookline High School and was eager to join the theatre life. Her parents discouraged her, however, saying she would never have a place to call home. They encouraged her to go to art school. Though she attended Mass. School of Art for 4 years studying fashion design, she was not about to forget the stage. After graduating, she headed for New York and got a job with Pictorial Review, where she would walk to the shops on Fifth Ave. and 57th Ave. to sketch the clothes she would see in the windows. From her drawings, the company would then make patterns. During her lunch hours, Mrs. Arnold would go to theatrical agencies looking for a job, and after one month she was hired to be a maid in a Broadway play.

She spent a summer at the Providence Stock Co. where she rehearsed in the mornings, performed in matinees and evening performances, and had to learn new parts each week as the plays changed. "And it was a hot, hot summer, with no air conditioning. But I loved it."

She returned to New York and performed in "Golden Days" with Helen Hayes. When the play closed she became the understudy to Vivian Tobin in Chicago. Taylor Holmes was the play's leading man, and when Tobin left, Mrs. Arnold was given the part. She was scheduled to open in New York when

career when the Herald closed, but Tom Whinnip of the Boston Globe talked her into joining them. One day she was at the Herald, the next at the Globe, staying with them for 8 years.

With her retirement in Duxbury came her "fourth" life. "At heart I am a stodgy, domestic person. I loved being at home when my children were young. I like being in one place, having a routine. My daughter urges me to travel and I guess I'm a stick-in-the-mud, but even when I go to Boston I am thinking, 'I can't wait to get home.' I guess with so much moving as a child, I just like staying put."

She came to Duxbury in 1962 to live full time in the house that has been such a part of her life through the years. She enjoys writing a weekly column for the Clipper, enjoys walking a mile or so every day, and takes great pride in her 6 grandchildren, all DHS graduates, and her 3 great-granddaughters, the latest born March 4. She watches them grow with great interest, wondering at their talents, knowing that her own childhood scribbles in a notebook led her to an exciting, successful career.

She has every right to be proud.